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ABSTRACT

This booklet for parents provides a brief explanation of how babies and young children learn to communicate with others (through actions and words) and suggests specific ways parents can help their children learn to communicate effectively. (RH)

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Tuning in to Young Children

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Lynda Harriman

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CHILDREN GROW AND CHANGE so rapidly during early childhood that just when parents think they understand their children, new and unexpected behaviors appear. Today's quiet, content baby is tomorrow's active, exploring toddler.

Keeping in tune with our children and seeing the world from their viewpoint is rewarding, though challenging. Spending time with them gives us clues about their abilities to understand the world. Often they interpret an experience quite differently from the way adults do.

HOW YOUNG CHILDREN COMMUNICATE AND INTERPRET

Using Actions

Long before children know enough words to tell us about their needs and wants, they communicate their desires through actions. For example, babies show they are not hungry by closing their mouths tightly when someone tries to continue feeding them. Towards the end of the first year, they show excitement and pleasure by making sounds and reaching out their arms when a parent comes near, or when they are handed a bottle of milk. Crying and trying to get up when put to bed may indicate, "I'm not tired yet." Actions continue to be an important way for children to communicate throughout the preschool years.

Showing understanding. How children react to situations can also be clues as to what and how much they understand. Before most young children can talk, they understand much of what others are saying to them. Somewhere around one year of age, young children give cues that say, "Yes, I know what you mean." For example, if Johnnie reaches for a ball when his parents ask him to do so, they know Johnnie recognizes a ball. Babies show their understanding by pointing to objects and by following instructions such as "clap your hands," "wave bye-bye," and "no, no."

Making wants known. Even when children can speak, some may choose not to. This may be because families understand cues so well that children do not have to speak to have their wants and needs met. A grunt, a pointed finger, or a tantrum may be all that is needed to get the child's message across.

Using Words

Young children use language when they find pleasure and satisfaction in doing so. For example, consider the baby who at 10 or 11 months begins to call out from the crib. The loud "a — a — a" has a questioning sound to it. This message is met with a parent's footsteps and answer, "I'm coming!" The child's squeal of excitement shows that the baby is learning that sounds can make things happen.

Babies also like to hear the sounds they make repeated by others. Their happy sounds and smiling faces when parents mimic their "ba-ba-ba" or "de, da" show that they like this sound-making game. Parents who repeat children's sounds encourage children to use their voices.

Giving encouragement. When children have learned a few words, they should always be encouraged to put their ideas into words. Remind them, "Tell me." Parents can help by using words to describe familiar things. For example, talk about what you are doing for or with a child: "We are putting on Kay's shoes."

From the time children are tiny babies, talking to them often about many things is important. The words children hear are the words they learn. With patience and help from parents, children learn to use their voices instead of pushing or hitting when they are angry or upset. Slowly, words become a new way to express wants, feelings, and thoughts.

For instance, Sandy wanted the toy turtle her little sister was holding and started to take it from her.

DAD: Wait, Sandy. You want that toy turtle, don't you?
SANDY: Yes! Make her give it to me!
DAD: Ask her to let you have a turn.
SANDY: May I have a turn with the turtle now?

Sandy was encouraged to use words to make her wants known.

Expanding ideas. Once children begin talking, they often use one or two words for a whole idea. "Juice" may mean the child wants a glass of milk, orange juice, or water or just something to eat or drink. When parents know what the child means, they can add to learning by saying the idea completely and correctly. "You would like a glass of milk." Adding to the child's one or two words tells the child what the parent thinks the child means. It also gives the child a correct example of how to express the idea in a more complete way.

Using "My" Viewpoint

Young children understand only one point of view — their own. They do not know that others may not share this view. As a result, they often expect others to have the same point of view and background information. When they are sharing ideas or experiences, they tend to give only major facts or sketchy outlines. Parents who lack some of the relevant information may then respond inappropriately. This upsets young children, who can't understand why they haven't been understood.

Young Billy, who spent the day with his aunt, had this problem:

BILLY: Mom, we went to the toy store, and I saw that toy I want. What is it called?
MOM: What does it look like?
BILLY: You know, the toy I saw.
MOM: Remember, Billy, I wasn't there with you so I didn't see it. Can you tell me something about it? What color is it?

Though Billy knew his mother did not go on the shopping trip, he still expected her to share his point of view and to know what he had experienced. His mother's questions will help Billy see the need to give her more information.

Questioning. Asking children about what they saw or what they felt or experienced helps them understand that others do not always share their view. Sometimes ask a child to share a story he or she has heard or a movie that has been seen. Help the child describe specific details by asking what happened first, second, and so on. This will help the child see that others do not always know what happened and sometimes need help to understand. Questions like "What happened first? Next? What happened when . . . ? Where were they?" all help children recapture the experience in enough detail for others to understand.

Using "My" Limited Experience

Young children depend almost totally on their past experiences to understand the present. They try to interpret the new by relating it to what they already know.

Consider 4-year-old Jenny's experience. While at the dentist's office, she was given a weekly dental care chart and told to place a check on it every day when she brushed her teeth. "In a week you will have your own dental care record," the assistant told her. When Jenny arrived home, she excitedly informed her father, "In a week I'm going to get a new record from the dentist. Can I play it on my record player?" Jenny had related the term "record" to the only meaning she had for the word.

Informing. Children sometimes need new information to change their way of thinking and to understand new meanings for words or happenings. Parents can recognize and clarify misunderstandings. Be aware of children's activities and listen carefully to their conversations. What they say tells much about what they understand.

Describing. Having plenty of labels for things in their world and having many kinds of experiences help children understand and communicate. The more they have to refer to when they are in new situations, the more adequately they will be able to understand.

Thinking Concretely

Just because young children use words their parents use does not mean they think like adults. Adults are able to think in abstract ways, but young children are not — they believe what they see. For instance, young Sarah overheard her parents speaking of the neighbor who had a big mouth. When the neighbor appeared at the door, Sarah calmly remarked, "His mouth doesn't look so big!" And Scott looked up with surprise when his mother exclaimed, "Your father just hit the ceiling!"

Explaining. Since young children interpret everything in very literal ways, explanations are often needed. For example, Crisy was told, "You get to go to school when you are 5 years old." However, her parents knew to explain that this did not mean she began school on the same day as her February birthday; they were aware that this was a logical interpretation for a 4-year-old to make.

Clarifying. Parents need to be careful that efforts to improve children's understandings do not lead to other misunderstandings and thus to disappointment. For example, Donnie's parents, tired of his always asking, "When will it be Christmas?" finally said to him, "It won't be Christmas until it snows." As might be expected, after the first snow in November Donnie thought the next day would be Christmas. He was probably disappointed and confused when he learned that this was not so.

HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN COMMUNICATE AND INTERPRET

Give Children Opportunities To Express Themselves

Share ideas. The notion that children should be seen and not heard is potentially damaging to the development of communication skills. By relating to people, children learn to use words and thoughts. They need many chances to talk, discuss, and make plans, not only with other children but also with adults. Conversational experiences are valuable to their learning; by talking with others, children learn much about themselves and others.

Explore. Parents who talk with their children about what the children are doing add much to the experience. Children can be encouraged to discuss and explore things and situations with parents. Parents may be able to help children explain or understand ideas better by giving them new, more expressive words. Or they may help children see other points of view in a situation.

Play. Children also develop communication skills through make-believe play. By watching children at play and playing with them, parents can learn much about their children's understanding of their world. Children often role play their impressions of familiar roles and relationships. They also communicate much to themselves and others. Play is a great exercise in self-expression and self-discovery.

Give Directions Carefully

Young children are less likely than adults to be able to follow a series of instructions. It is not easy for them to remember a lot of information for very long. Father should not be surprised if Judy fails to follow through when he hurriedly tells her, "Take these toys to your room, put your pajamas away, and get your shoes and socks on. Then wash your face and brush your teeth before you put on your coat and mittens. Now hurry!"

Being told too much, too fast, and under pressure is upsetting and overwhelming to young children. They find it hard to follow all the instructions and gain their parents' approval in such situations. Repeated failure may lead to guilt feelings, self-rejection, and a feeling of being rejected by parents.

Remember that young children's ability to remember is both limited and short-lived. They can remember less than adults and cannot remember as long as adults can in most situations. This does not mean parents should expect very little from young children. It does mean that young children will more likely be able to follow instructions that are (1) ***short,*** (2) ***simple,*** and (3) ***given one step at a time.*** Very young children may understand only one- or two-step directions.

"TAKE YOUR . . . , PUT YOUR . . . ,
AND GET YOUR . . . , THEN WASH
YOUR . . . AND BRUSH YOUR . . .
BEFORE YOU PUT ON YOUR . . .
NOW HURRY."

When these guides are followed, even young children can succeed at many tasks. When children are able to succeed, they are pleased. Parents can notice successes and mention with pride that they, too, are pleased. This helps children want to try even harder next time.

Help Children Make Correct Interpretations

Children need to feel good about how they communicate. When others make fun of what they say or constantly correct them, children may become upset or discouraged. As a result, those children may become less interested in trying to talk. Avoid judging or condemning what a child has said. At the same time, be aware of incorrect interpretations.

Repeat correctly. There are ways parents can help their children speak more accurately without telling them, "That is wrong, say it this way." Simply give accurate additional information. For example, you could repeat correctly the idea or word that has been mistaken, as Janet's mother did:

"Look, Mom, a plane!" said Janet excitedly as a large helicopter flew overhead.

"That helicopter certainly looks like a plane, Janet," replied her mother. "Helicopters fly, but they don't have wings. They are moved by that large propeller above the helicopter."

Janet's mother helped her to see the difference in appearance between planes and helicopters. Another time, Janet will be more likely to know the difference.

Giving children corrective information makes it possible for them to communicate more accurately. It also adds to what they know and understand about the world around them. As his toy boat settled to the bottom of the bathtub, Jimmy said with dismay, "Oh, no, my boat is *drowning!*" His father replied, "Your boat did *sink,* didn't it?"

Discuss together. The more words or ideas that children have available to relate to people, things, and events, the better those people, things, and events will be understood and remembered. Talking about experiences helps clarify and fix them more permanently in children's minds.

Help Children See Relationships

As children begin to see links between words and meanings, understanding develops. Repeated experiences give children firm links between word meanings and objects, people, and situations.

Identify similarities. With limited memory and limited experience, young children sometimes do not see relationships that exist between words and objects or events. "Hot!" may mean "fireplace" to the young child

who has been repeatedly warned to stay away from it. However, the same child may not realize that there is similar danger near the kitchen stove or an electric outlet.

Identify differences. Young children sometimes fail to see differences that exist, because they tend to focus on the whole object or event rather than its details. For example, children often may refer to mannequins in department stores as "man," "woman," "mommy," or "daddy."

Failing to discriminate enough to see similarities and differences in detail is a common error of young children. Parents can help by pointing out similarities or differences a young child may overlook.

Teach Children the Correct Names or Labels

Meaning depends upon the ideas or images words recall. Most of a child's first words are learned at home; meanings attached to them are very personal and related to family situations. If the family uses words that are

not used in other social settings, children will find it hard to talk to people outside the family. For example, because some parents think baby talk is cute, they sometimes use it themselves; as a result, children attach meaning to various nonsense sounds or mispronounced words, instead of hearing and using the correct terms.

Talk clearly. When young Tony saw fog for the first time, his mother said, "See, Tony, it is foggy out." Tony excitedly tried to repeat her words — "froggy out!" Because the expression sounded cute, Tony's parents didn't clarify the correct pronunciation of the word. Tony kept using it. After he had started nursery school, Tony told his friends one day that it had been "froggy" at his house when he left for school. The resulting misunderstanding left Tony unhappy and discouraged that his friends did not know what he meant.

Parents do not do children a favor by letting them build a vocabulary of words that only family members understand. Children notice the effect of their speech on others. Accuracy and good pronunciation affect their being understood.

As children begin to speak, they may be unable to pronounce correctly all the words they hear. If they continue to hear correct pronunciations, in time they will say words correctly. Listen for words your child has a hard time saying. Make extra efforts to say these words very slowly, clearly, and deliberately. This helps children hear and learn correct pronunciations.

Help Children See How Meanings Change

A number of words in the English language have more than one meaning. "Fall," for example, may refer to the season, to water motion, or to an action where someone may be injured. Adults and older children pick up cues in the way in which words are used; they consider the situation in deciding on the intended meaning. Young children, however, with limited experiences in life and in using words, may not be able to choose properly.

Consider the likely confusion that may result in this situation. Kristi is told her mother just "tied up" a package for mailing. Soon after, she learns her father will be late getting home because he is "tied up" in traffic.

When parents shift meanings, they should explain what they are doing so their children can understand what is happening. Otherwise, children may not know what to question. If meanings are not made clear, young children interpret and draw their own conclusions, which may be incorrect.

Deal With Feelings

Children show many important feelings through their words and actions. Because parents sometimes dislike the way children show their feelings, they punish, ignore, or deny that feelings are real and important. The message the child gets is, "I am bad for having these feelings," or "It is wrong to feel this way." Consequently, the child may develop feelings of self-rejection or guilt. Messages like "Boys don't cry!" "You don't hate me!" "Don't be afraid!" tell children that these feelings are bad. But such messages do *not* make the feelings disappear, nor do they help children learn to handle their feelings in a more acceptable way.

Share feelings. Parents can share their own unhappy feelings with their children. This helps a child know he or she isn't "bad" for having such feelings. It also opens an important avenue of meaningful communication. When parents recognize a child's feelings, they can say, "I know this is how you feel." This helps children feel understood.

Cope with feelings. Young children may have difficulty coping with their inner feelings without help. Parents can help children find acceptable and comfortable ways to deal with their feelings. Notice the difference in how feelings are handled in the following situations.

ALEX: Mom, I don't want to go to that new school.

MRS. S.: Well, you are going, so you might as well get used to the idea!

Alex was not given the chance to discuss or better understand his feelings. His mother quickly closed conversation and completely ignored his feelings about the situation. Consider how differently Teddy's mother handled the same situation.

TEDDY: Mom, I don't want to go to that new school.

MRS. T.: Why, Teddy?

TEDDY: I just don't.

MRS. T.: Are you a little afraid?

TEDDY: I think so.

MRS. T.: Is it because you don't know who your teacher will be, and you aren't sure you can find your new classroom?

TEDDY: That's part of it. I know all about my old school.

MRS. T.: You know, Teddy, I remember starting in a new school once, too. I was a little afraid myself. Would it help if we went to see the school and met your teacher before you start to school? We could also find your classroom.

TEDDY: I'd like that. You'd go too, right?

MRS. T.: I'd like to go with you.

TEDDY: Good! I don't think I'm afraid now.

Teddy's mother gave him a chance to reflect on his feelings. She showed understanding by telling Teddy of her own feelings about attending a new school. Her understanding and suggested solution should help the child realize that feelings are ok and can be handled.

Clarify feelings. Children need to be able to sort out and deal with their own feelings. They also need to consider feelings of others. Young children are very "me"-centered — how "I" feel is the most important. Parents can help them see how their words and actions affect other people. Comments like "When you do that, I feel so proud and good," or "Your behavior hurts me and makes me feel sad" tell children that others have feelings, too.

Children sometimes talk harshly or act angrily toward another person. When they do, a parent can help them to think about how they would feel if they were the other person Understanding how others feel helps children learn consideration.

Listen to Children

Communication skills are influenced by the examples children see and hear. Parents who listen to their children with interest, attention, and patience set a valuable example. The greatest audience children can have is an adult who is important to them and interested in them.

Invite children to talk. Children are more likely to share their ideas and feelings when others think their ideas are important. Try not to guess children's wants and needs so completely that they don't have to speak. Sometimes ask their opinion. Include them in adult conversations.

Listen patiently. People think faster than they speak. With limited vocabulary and experience in talking, children often take longer than adults to find the right word. Listen as though you have plenty of time. Hurrying children or calling attention to their use of a wrong word while they are talking is upsetting and confusing.

Show interest and concentrate on what is being said. Children can tell whether they have a parent's interest and attention by the way the parent replies or doesn't reply. It is enjoyable to share ideas with those who are really interested. Concentrating helps assure that what the child is trying to say is understood.

Hear children out. It is easy to form an opinion or reject children's views before they finish what they have to say. It may be hard not to stop them sometimes and set them straight. However, parents set an example of consideration by waiting their turn to speak. By letting children fully develop their ideas, parents also gain valuable insight into children's understanding and abilities to reason.

Maintain eye contact. Look at children when they are talking. By getting on eye level with children, it is easier to be attentive. This may mean bending down on one knee or sitting down and putting the child on your lap.

Reduce distractions. Distractions can prevent the communication of even simple, clear messages. Some communication can go on with interference, but the quality and enjoyment of the conversation are surely reduced. Common distractions should be minimized when possible.

Two common distractions are competing conversations and personal discomfort. Competing conversations occur when parents try to carry on an adult conversation and listen to a child at the same time. Other times, parents may try to listen to a radio or television and a child all at once. Get rid of unnecessary noise.

Personal discomfort from being tired or ill also makes it hard to listen to others. When parents are worried or under stress, they are likely to find it more difficult to give children their full attention. Some other things affecting personal comfort are temperature, humidity, and ventilation. These conditions influence anyone's ability to think and listen.

Sometimes these types of distractions cannot be avoided or simply removed. They should be recognized, however, as causing communication difficulties. If parents simply can't give their full attention, they should explain this to their children. Recognizing the presence of distractions helps prevent parents and children from blaming or resenting one another.

Expect children to think. Don't always have the answer. The best answer may be another question. Help children find answers and relate cause and effect by helping them think through and develop ideas for themselves. Questions like "What do you think? What would happen if you did that?" cause children to think for themselves and to think beyond the present situation. Turning questions back to children gives parents clues as to where children are in their ability to think, understand, and decide.

Help Children Learn To Listen

Children are expected to spend much of their childhood as the receivers of communication, listening to learn. Parents can help them become better listeners. If parents are good listeners, children are more willing to listen to them.

Much of children's ability to use words comes through listening. This does not mean parents should use only simple words when speaking to children. When adults use difficult words, children pick up the words and use them too. Listening is made hard for children only when parents think children have the same knowledge or information base that parents have. Explaining word meanings and ideas helps children to follow ideas and to shift meanings when others do. There are a number of ways parents can help children learn to listen.

Give children instructions. Remember instructions should be simple, clear, given one step at a time, and in order. Repeat if necessary. Trying to remember instructions is a good memory exercise. However, be careful that your expectations are realistic.

Include children in conversations. Have you ever been certain that a child wasn't paying any attention to what you said, only to be embarrassed later when the entire conversation was repeated for you word for word? Children do listen. They like to be included too. This makes them feel important.

Encourage critical listening. Children need to learn to evaluate what they hear. As parents and children explore ideas together, children learn to analyze what they have heard. Critical listening leads to critical thinking.

Build on children's interests. Watch children perk up and pay attention when conversation centers on a topic of interest to them. Knowing and focusing on children's interests helps them become better listeners.

Young children love to hear familiar experiences repeated over and over. They will listen more attentively and for longer periods of time to something that intrigues and interests them.

Repeat your understanding of children's messages. If you are unsure what is meant, say to the child, "I am hearing you say _____. Is that what you mean?" This tells the child you want to understand. It also takes concentration on the part of the child to check your understanding. Children want to be understood. They are more likely to listen carefully when they think you are trying to understand them.

Encourage listening to learn. Listening allows children to explore new experiences and to better understand their own experiences. During an unhurried pleasant time, stories are a valuable way to teach children to listen and learn.

The most worthwhile conversations are often the ones children begin. Share and rediscover the world with children. Then they will continue to explore new frontiers with you as they grow throughout childhood.

Prepared by Lynda Harriman, Child and Family Development Extension Specialist.

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